Nature's fury fueled by global warming and social-media hype

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A home is surrounded by floodwaters from Tropical Storm Harvey in Spring, Texas, on August 28. With multiple intense hurricanes, a powerful earthquake, wildfires and deadly flooding from Houston to India it seems that nature recently has just gone nuts. Photo from: AP Photo/David J. Phillip, file.

Recently, there have been four big hurricanes, a giant earthquake and many wildfires. It seems that nature has just gone nuts.

Some of these disasters, like an earthquake in Mexico last Friday, are natural. Others may have a mix of natural and man-made causes. We also always tend to look for patterns in disasters, even when they aren't there, scientists say.

"Nature's gone crazy," said Jeff Masters. He is a director at Weather Underground, an online weather service. "Welcome to the future." Masters thinks that extreme weather will happen more often because of global warming, or climate change. Global warming is the heating up of our planet. It is caused by burning fuels like coal and oil. We burn these fuels to run factories and light our homes. Burning them releases gasses that get trapped in Earth's atmosphere, which causes the planet to heat up. Over time, global warming can affect weather patterns around the world.

Here's a look at a rough few weeks in North America.

One-Two-Three-Four Hurricane Punch

Hurricane Harvey was still causing record flooding in Houston when Hurricane Irma formed and grew into a strong Category 5 storm. Hurricanes are put into categories based on their wind speed. Category 5 storms have the fastest winds. Right behind Irma, Hurricane Jose had almost grown into a Category 5 storm. It is very rare to have back-to-back storms of that strength, Masters said. Hurricane Katia was next. It hit Mexico's coast as a Category 1 storm.

There weren't many hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean over the last couple of years. That makes this year seem even worse, said Phil Klotzbach, a meteorology professor from Colorado State University. Klotzbach is a hurricane expert. He said there are calculations that measure the strength and duration of hurricanes. These calculations show that the three current Atlantic storms set a record on Friday. In just three days, Irma, Jose and Katia produced a huge amount of power. This same amount is usually produced over three months in a normal hurricane season.

Shake, Rattle And Roll

As Mexico was preparing for Hurricane Katia, it was hit with one of the strongest earthquakes in the county's history. The earthquake was felt by people more than 650 miles away. Earthquakes are given a magnitude, or size, based on how big their vibrations are. Earthquakes that measure magnitude 2.0 cannot be felt by people. Earthquakes with a magnitude of 4.0 and higher can be felt easily. The huge earthquake in Mexico was magnitude 8.1. It vibrated as deep as 43 miles underground. An earthquake hitting that deep with that strength is unusual, according to a professor from Cornell University. It was one of the five largest for that depth in the past 40 years, he said.

The West On Fire

On Friday, 82 wildfires were burning in the United States. The fires touched nearly 1.5 million acres in nine states in the West. So far this year, more than 8 million acres have burned. That's more land than the entire state of Maryland. One fire in Oregon has burned more than 175,000 acres, almost the size of New York City. As of Friday, only 5 percent of that fire is contained.

Drought and a heat wave have helped the fires grow. On September 1, the temperature hit 106 degrees in San Francisco. In this California city, the temperature is normally around 65 degrees in September.

Normal Events Get Social Media Treatment

Sometimes there's a pattern with disasters. Sometimes there isn't. Looking for patterns gives us a sense of control, even if it's not real, said Scott Lilienfeld. He is a professor at Emory University. "The human mind is a pattern-seeking organ," Lilienfeld said. "That's how our minds work."

Scientists are still learning how climate change affects extreme weather. They think that warmer ocean water will make hurricanes stronger and wetter. Some say global warming has increased the number of strong hurricanes.

Warming may play a minor role, said Klotzbach, the hurricane expert. But he says that Twitter and Facebook can make things appear worse than they are, too.

It may seem that nature is destroying the planet. "But a lot of this stuff is getting attention because of social media," he said.

This article is available at 5 reading levels at https://newsela.com.

Quiz

1 Read the section “One-Two-Three-Four Hurricane Punch.”

Select the sentence from the section that shows that the hurricanes this season are much more powerful than usual.

(A) There weren't many hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean over the last couple of years.

(B) That makes this year seem even worse, said Phil Klotzbach, a meteorology professor from Colorado State University.

(C) He said there are calculations that measure the strength and duration of hurricanes.

(D) These calculations show that the three current Atlantic storms set a record on Friday.

2 Read the selection from the section "Shake, Rattle And Roll."

Earthquakes are given a magnitude, or size, based on how big their vibrations are. Earthquakes that measure magnitude 2.0 cannot be felt by people. Earthquakes with a magnitude of 4.0 and higher can be felt easily. The huge earthquake in Mexico was magnitude 8.1.

Which of the following is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

(A) The earthquake in Mexico was the strongest earthquake ever felt.

(B) The earthquake in Mexico probably was not felt by many people.

(C) The earthquake in Mexico must have had a very strong vibration.

(D) The earthquake in Mexico was not as big as people thought it was.

3 Read the sentences below that summarize the MAIN ideas of the article.

The weather has been unusual in North America the last few weeks. Many people believe that global warming is causing these changes.

Which answer choice would complete the summary?

(A) However, others say that this year scientists have done a lot of measurements and calculations.

(B) However, others say that there have not been many hurricanes in the Atlantic in recent years.

(C) However, others say that Irma, Jose and Katia have the strength of one hurricane season.

(D) However, others say that social media might be making the weather seem worse than it actually is.

4 Read the following detail from the article.

Recently, there have been four big hurricanes, a giant earthquake and many wildfires.

How does this detail develop the central idea of the article?

(A) It gives examples of all the natural disasters caused by global warming.

(B) It gives examples of the many strange weather events happening lately.

(C) It gives examples of how social media is giving weather a lot of attention.

(D) It gives examples of how people try to find patterns when things happen.